
This volume is the first of a series of multi-themed studies on the Indian Ocean World (iow) under the editorship of Gwyn Campbell, founding director of the Indian Ocean World Centre at McGill University in Canada. The overall orientation of the series is that it ‘breaks from the restrictions imposed by regional studies and Eurocentric periodization,’ it seeks to address timely and broadband debates in the environmental social sciences, and it offers ‘new insights for present-day policymakers in key areas from labor relations and migration to diplomacy and trade’ (see https://www.springer.com/series/14661). The present work’s sophisticated quality of scholarship certainly lives up to those promises. The whole collection is a self-conscious ‘entry into the tent of the iow to positively expand our understanding of the relationships between animals, human beings, commerce, and world systems’ (p. 19).

The ten chapters that comprise this book—nine specific studies plus an introductory chapter—are concise and quality samplers of the range of works done by historians at the forefront of iow interdisciplinary studies. Each study specifies a particular period (‘the long nineteenth century’, ‘1795–1895’, ‘seventeenth century’, or ‘early modern Japan’), centers on a single species or its trade product (oysters, gastropod mollusks and their encasing, peacock’s feathers, donkeys, cattle, horses, ivory, and deerskin), and weaves anthropological or sociological readings for each narrative case. “Animals and political economy” is a prominent thematic reading throughout the book. The wealth of detail supporting this interpretive stance—such as how animal products turned into items as disparate as ‘hair ornaments, eye-glass frames, and dildos’ (p. 11)—will be enjoyable for readers to discover for themselves.

For those who will be taking this book as a first acquaintance with iow studies, Vink’s (2007) explanation may help in appreciating this book’s thematic focus—‘investigating animals, their products, and their trades’ (p. 5)—and what the book freshly brings to previous approaches and critiques of iow studies. Whether the ‘cohesion and contrasts’ of this posited ‘unit of space’ is really about a singular ‘world’ (Pearson 2003), an operative ‘sum of its land routes and sea routes’ (to borrow Lucien Febvre’s classic formulation), or whether it is simply a chosen heuristic based on necessarily plural yet well-entwined ‘worlds’ (Beaujard 2019), ‘a sum of four or so separate civilizations’ (to echo Kirti Chaudhuri’s line)—the book bypasses these theoretical concerns by
directly giving us very finely wrought empirical descriptions of particular “sub-areas” within that ‘unit’.

In doing so, the chapters have more space to reflect instead on the methodological problem of ‘differential information’ (p. 159) in presently accessed materials, as illustrated in William Gervase Clarence-Smith’s study (chapter 6) in which ‘larger, more prestigious animals [like horses] are more prominent in the source material than working animals [like donkeys]’. Several chapters of the book suggest creative ways to get around such an observed historiographic ‘source disparity’ (p. 19) in narrating highly diverse animal kinds and products, beyond those that are much talked about in present academic literature.

For those who are already well-acquainted with this rapidly expanding academic enterprise, the introductory chapter’s timely and apt engagement with the Anthropocene-versus-Capitalocene (or even Plantationocene [Wolford 2021]) discourses in recent literature will certainly be much appreciated for its comparative insights. Whereas the now familiar, and mostly Atlantic-based, “Columbian exchange” framework has popularized the idea that animals have indeed been literally made to “work” in the construction of broader European/Capitalist structures’ (p. 10),

Similar patterns, however, did not pervade the IOW. Here, Europeans encountered diverse animals already put to ‘work’ in various capacities and in various conditions. Many IOW populations had been using animal labor in agriculture for centuries before the European arrival, for example—a divergence from the Atlantic world.

p. 10, emphasis added

A close study of the book’s varied regional areas will underline three questions, sharply suggested in the introduction, that will move us beyond “Capitalocene” (and Plantationocene) framings. First, how pervasive, and in what modes, were animals “working” in pre-Europe/Capitalist structures? Second, on animal trade demand, what other forms of hybrid IOW agencies can be opened if one zooms in on local spatial scales and the specific items dealt in such places beyond the thematic of ‘European demand for spices and metals’? Third, given that ‘natural [environmental] fluctuations in the Indian Ocean monsoon underpinned human-animal relationships in the IOW’ (p. 15), what are the differential effects of such nature-agentive fluctuations to indigenous modes of living among those in the highlands and the interiors—not just the lowland/coastal trading centers?

The last question is especially salient given that another important idea in the book’s introduction (which lead this reviewer to pay close attention to how
it plays in each of the case chapters) is the claim that when one shifts the attention beyond the hitherto iow-favored ‘littoral and coastal regions’, new ecological and environmental patterns become immediately palpable:

where wind and currents have bound iow commercial histories of maritime and littoral spaces, animal diseases, rain, and terrain feature more prominently in upstream and inland histories. These themes are integral factors to each of the histories described, often more so than the arrival of European capitalist influences.

p. 11, emphasis added

This empirical heuristic certainly contrasts with other ways of seeing history that find almost nothing but traces of colonialist Europe and Capitalism. Instead of such a colonial/decolonial dialectic, the book focuses more on ‘networks, belief systems, and environments’ to explore the empirical interweaving of geography, material and symbolic cultures, and trade.

I end this review with two quibbles on categorial matters. First, while we certainly need keener and wider amassing of well-organized data for a more realistic grasp of broad historical processes, the question of the actual status of the iow as a real unit still haunts the book. Perhaps dramatizing this point is a section of Winters (pp. 28–33) on the cassowary ‘gift’ given by the Javanese people in 1596 to the crew of the first Dutch fleet that landed on their island. By some turns of history, the cassowary ‘left a longer-term imprint on The Hague’ so that ‘[a]t the corner of what today is Museum Mauritshuis, there is a street named Casuariestraat’. But isn’t it just nitpicking when this cassowary is then suddenly renamed in the narrative as ‘[t]he Indian Ocean bird’ (p. 33)?

Second, as almost each chapter of the book includes instances of animals as ‘gifts’ and other forms of non-commercial relations (at least in the longue durée and in some finer-scaled accounts of the places studied) it is worth pondering why it is always ‘animal trade histories’ that are featured.

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References


